Taliban contest UN report on malnourished women, children

KABUL: Afghanistan's Taliban government said on Saturday its goal was "to help all malnourished children and mothers", after the United Nations warned that millions would experience acute malnutrition this year.

The World Food Programme's Afghanistan director John Aylieff said this week that five million women and children would experience life-threatening malnutrition in a worsening crisis in the country of 40 million people.

The United Nations agency has said that nearly four million children would require treatment for malnutrition, a figure also supported by the UN-mandated Integrated Food Security Phase Classification. "These numbers are staggering," said Aylieff.

The Afghan public health ministry gave lower figures on Saturday, saying that there were "around three million children and mothers suffering from malnutrition".

"About 1.3 million children are moderately malnourished, 700,000 suffer from acute malnutrition and 900,000 mothers are moderately to severely malnourished," ministry spokesman Sharafat Zaman said.

The ministry said the number of facilities offering treatment for malnutrition had grown from "800 to 3,200".

"Our goal is to reach all patients... and help all malnourished women and children," Zaman said.

"We must distribute medicines, food and assistance with the help of international organisations," he said, while also highlighting Afghanistan's efforts "to produce the necessary resources internally".

The WFP is seeking $390 million in an urgent appeal to feed six million Afghans over the next six months, although Aylieff described the chances of getting the funds as "bleak" after aid donations were slashed in recent years.—AFP

Indonesian plane with 10 people on board goes missing

MAKASSAR: Indonesian authorities are searching for a plane carrying three government workers and seven crew members after contact with the aircraft was lost on Saturday, officials said.

The Indonesia Air Transport turboprop plane left from Yogyakarta and was headed to the city of Makassar on Sulawesi island, according to rescuers.

Three employees of the ministry of marine affairs and fisheries were on board, on a mission to conduct aerial monitoring of resources in the area, Minister Sakti Wahyu Trenggono told a press conference. Seven crew members were also on board, according to the airline. Contact with the plane was lost shortly after 1pm (0600 GMT).

Muhammad Arif Anwar, the head of the local search and rescue agency, said teams were deployed to a mountainous area of Maros Regency, which borders Makassar, near the last known location of the plane. The search on land and by air involved the air force, police and volunteers, he added.—AFP

KENNEDY SPACE CENTER (Florida, US): Nasa rolls out its Artemis II space launch rocket and Orion spacecraft out of the vehicle assembly building to the launch pad. The slow, hours-long trek kicked off final tests ahead of the first crewed lunar mission since 1972.—AFP

UN chief warns 'powerful forces' harming global ties

World body's 80th anniversary commemorated at Methodist Central Hall in London, where representatives from 51 countries met on Jan 10, 1946

LONDON: UN chief Antonio Guterres on Saturday deplored a host of "powerful forces lining up to undermine global cooperation" in a London speech marking the 80th anniversary of the first UN General Assembly.

Guterres, whose term as secretary general ends on Dec 31 this year, delivered the warning at the Methodist Central Hall in London, where representatives from 51 countries met on Jan 10, 1946, for the General Assembly's first session.

They met in London because the UN headquarters in New York had not yet been built. Guterres paid tribute to Britain for its decisive role in the creation of the United Nations and for continuing to champion it. But he said 2025 had been a "profoundly challenging year for international cooperation and the values of the UN".

"We see powerful forces lining up to undermine global cooperation," he said, adding: "Despite these rough seas, we sail ahead." Guterres cited a new treaty on marine biological diversity as an example of continued progress.

The treaty establishes the first legal framework for the conservation and sustainable use of marine diversity in the two-thirds of oceans beyond national limits.

"These quiet victories of international cooperation — the wars prevented, the famine averted, the vital treaties secured — do not always make the headlines," he said. "Yet they are real. And they matter."

A "robust, responsive and well-resourced multilateral" system is needed to address the world's interconnected challenges, Mr Guterres urged, but the "values of multilateralism are being chipped away."

The secretary general gave the example of a landmark international agreement to protect marine life in international waters and the seabed, which comes into force on Saturday, as a "model of modern diplomacy, led by science, with the participation not just of governments, but of civil society, Indigenous Peoples and local communities."

"These quiet victories of international cooperation — the wars prevented, the famine averted, the vital treaties secured — do not always make the headlines. Yet they are real. And they matter. If we wish to secure more such victories, we must ensure the full respect of international law and defend multilateralism, strengthening it for our times."

As he addressed the London audience, the secretary general expressed his "gratitude to the United Kingdom for its decisive role in creating the United Nations," and for being "such a strong pillar of multilateralism and champion of the United Nations today."

High stakes for a better world

Looking towards the future, the secretary General called for an international system that reflects the modern world, including reforming international financial systems and the Security Council.—Agencies

Paracetamol in pregnancy is safe, says study

President Trump claimed last year the painkiller could be linked to autism in children if taken during pregnancy

LONDON: Taking paracetamol, known as Tylenol in the US, during pregnancy is safe, a group of European researchers have said, after compiling data in response to US President Donald Trumps claims of a link to autism last year.

In a review published in the British journal *The Lancet Obstetrics, Gynaecology & Womens Health* on Saturday, the team said they had focused on amassing the best-quality evidence to address the claims.

Paracetamol is safe to use in pregnancy, said lead author Asma Khalil, professor of obstetrics and maternal foetal medicine at City St Georges, University of London.

The key message is reassurance: When used as recommended, the best available evidence does not support a causal link with autism, ADHD (attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder) or intellectual disability.

Khalil said she had been asked about the popular pain medication also known as acetaminophen by her patients after Trump in September told pregnant women not to take the drug. At the time, national and international medical groups decried the presidents comments, saying they were not evidence-based.

Paracetamol/Tylenol is the only pain reliever considered safe for pregnant women, and doctors already advise them to use the smallest amount for the shortest time to control pain and fever during pregnancy. Untreated, these conditions can be risky for both pregnant women and their babies. The researchers conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis of existing data, finding 43 studies that were then assessed for quality and bias using a standard tool.

The team particularly focused on studies that looked at children born to the same mother who took paracetamol/Tylenol during one pregnancy but not the other. These take into account shared genetic factors and family environments that could be linked to autism or the other conditions studied, Khalil said.

There were only three studies of this type, but they were large, covering more than 260,000 children assessed for autism, and around 335,000 and 405,000 for ADHD and intellectual disabilities respectively.

They showed no significant link between use of the drug and any of the conditions studied. This remained the case when results from all of the high-quality studies that were assessed were pooled, the authors said.

Khalil said much of the work showing a potential link, including a review of 46 studies cited by Trump officials, was prone to bias or confounding factors that her team's review had tried to account for. Grainne McAlonan, professor of Translational Neuroscience at King's College London, who was not involved in the research, praised the study, adding: I hope the findings of this study bring the matter to a close.—Reuters

Museveni, Uganda's ex-revolutionary, enters fifth decade in power

KAMPALA: Yoweri Museveni has been president longer than most Ugandans have been alive, and shows no sign of giving up his place among the world's longest-serving leaders after he won a seventh election on Saturday.

Shortly after Museveni took power in 1986, ending years of bloodshed and chaos under tyrannical rulers, the young president mused that leaders overstaying their welcome lay at the heart of Africa's problems. But four decades later, the introspection is gone and Museveni — once hailed in the West as a model African leader committed to good governance — has joined the ranks of those he once criticised.

His genial demeanour and penchant for folksy parables belie a past as a wily guerrilla fighter and ruthless political survivor. During his 40-year reign, Museveni has fused state and party, and crushed political opposition, to such an extent that any real outside challenge to him or his National Resistance Movement (NRM) has become impossible.

YOWERI Museveni

At 81 — though some opponents say he is older — Museveni says he is fighting fit.

Having once promised to retire and tend to his cherished long-horned Ankole cows, he has instead outlasted every ruler on the continent bar Teodoro Obiang Nguema of Equatorial Guinea and Paul Biya of Cameroon.

Museveni was born on Sept 15, 1944, into a cattle-keeping family of the Hima community in Ntungamo District of southwestern Uganda. He studied at the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania in the 1960s, then a kind of finishing school for anti-colonialists, where his thesis was on the revolutionary violence promoted by French philosopher Frantz Fanon.

British journalist William Pike, who interviewed Museveni in 1984, described him as having the "faraway look... of a dreamer, a revolutionary" who was "intensely serious but showed flashes of humour".

Challenger within

After returning to Uganda, he was forced back to Tanzania as an exile during the regime of Idi Amin. Museveni helped form the Front for National Salvation, which played a part in Amin's overthrow in 1979.

Museveni took up arms after a rigged election in 1980 and led a guerrilla insurgency known as the Ugandan Bush War that finally captured Kampala in 1986.

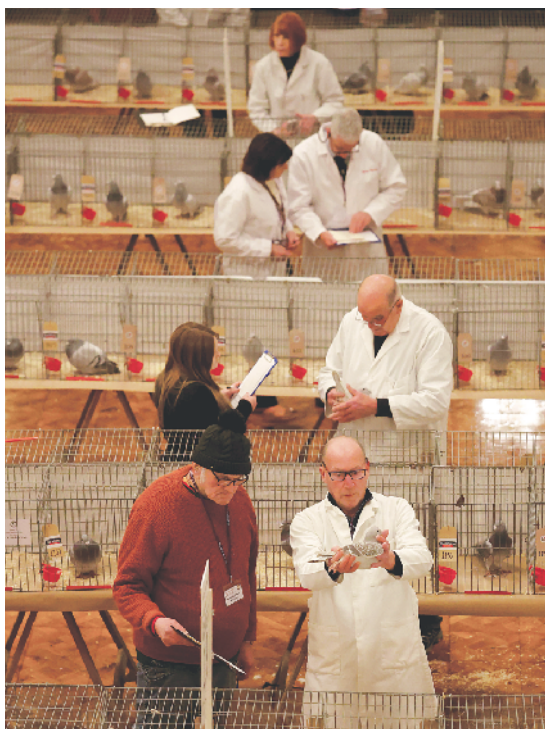
A new constitution led to his victory in elections the following year, which he repeated in 2001, 2006, 2011, 2016, 2021 and now 2026. He had the constitution changed twice to remove term and age limits. Rights groups have criticised the increasingly violent repression of any challengers.

Despite his radical past, Museveni proved a pragmatic leader, bending to Western demands that he impose stringent neoliberal reforms to stabilise the economy.

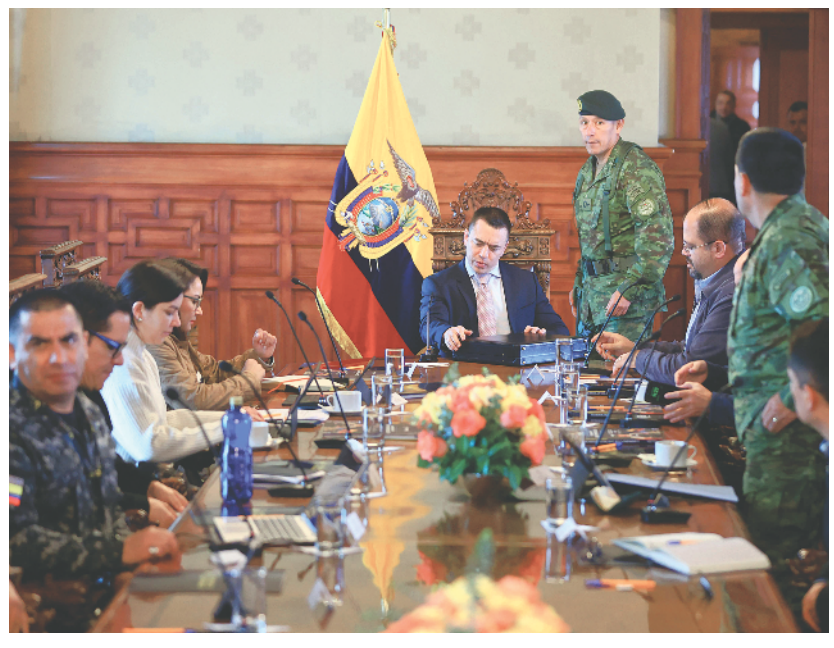
He made himself a useful military partner to the West at moments when they questioned his crushing of democratic rights, not least when he contributed significant troops to fight against Islamist insurgents in Somalia in the 2000s.

There was renewed criticism in 2023 over an anti-gay law seen as one of the world's harshest but Museveni showed his knack for weathering the storm.—AFP

NEWSMAKERS



BLACKPOOL (UK): Judges stand between rows of cages containing pigeons as they begin to examine the birds before competition gets underway at the British Homing World Show of the Year on its 50th anniversary.—Reuters



A VIEW of a security meeting at Carondelet Palace in Quito.—AFP

AVILA: A horseman rides through a bonfire during an annual celebration on the eve of Saint Anthony's day, an event that honours Spain's patron saint of animals.—Reuters

HWACHEON (South Korea): A participant poses with the trout he caught with his hands in icy water during an event promoting the Hwacheon Ice Festival, south of the demilitarised zone separating the two Koreas.—Reuters

Ecuador deploys 10,000 troops to fight drug gangs

GUAYAQUIL: Ecuador on Friday deployed 10,000 soldiers in three coastal provinces to fight drug-trafficking gangs blamed for a surge in violence in the once-peaceful country.

President Daniel Noboa's government has vowed an iron-fist approach as the South American nation hits record levels of murders and other violent crimes. Hundreds of special forces soldiers were deployed to "reinforce security operations" in the provinces of Guayas, Manabi and Los Rios, Air Force General Mario Bedoya told reporters.

Planes with military personnel were also sent to Manta, the country's main fishing port. Ecuador is located between the world's two top exporters of cocaine — Colombia and Peru — and has seen a surge in violence by gangs linked to Mexican and Colombian cartels.

Killings and clashes in neighbourhoods and public spaces have become commonplace, and the country closed 2025 with a rate of 52 homicides per 100,000 residents — one every hour, according to the Geneva-based Organised Crime Observatory. "Prison or hell for anyone who jeopardizes security," the defense ministry said.

Defence Minister Gian Carlo Loffredo has instructed the military high command to operate indefinitely out of the port city of Guayaquil, where troops are inspecting seaports strategic for drug trafficking.—AFP

AMSTERDAM: Visitors pick tulip flowers for free at a garden on National Tulip Day in the Netherlands.—AFP